

**Opening Statement
Chairman Mark Souder**

**“Authorizing Presidential Vision:
Making Permanent The Efforts of the Faith-Based and Community Initiative”**

**Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,
and Human Resources
Committee on Government Reform and Oversight**

June 21, 2005

Good afternoon and thank you all for coming. In particular, I welcome two distinguished colleagues on our first panel, Congressman Mark Green of Wisconsin and Congressman Bobby Scott of Virginia.

We have two additional panels of eminent witnesses. Representing hundreds of years of total experience in service to others, I have no doubt that the collective compassion of our witnesses could generate its own electricity.

We have not held a hearing on the provision of community services since April of 2004, but this the Subcommittee’s eleventh hearing on the topic. It is also our first legislative hearing. Congressman Green’s proposal to make the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives permanent, H.R. 1054, the Tools for Community Initiatives Act, raises an important debate that policy makers have confronted for decades. Mr. Green’s bill leads us to ask, “How do we organize the executive branch to promote and extend efficient and effective care to Americans in their time of need. As for the White House itself, it has been at least 15 years since the West Wing dedicated office space to the cause of grassroots service.

President Bush’s Faith-Based and Community Initiative has now been in existence for nearly four years. While providing for much political controversy, the Initiative has also fostered significant advances in the way government reaches Americans in their time of need. If the aim of the federal government is to efficiently execute federal programs, then it follows that these programs should make great efforts to collaborate with and assist those who are already so engaged. Most fundamentally, this is the goal of the Faith-Based and Community Initiative.

The President’s Initiative began in 2001 by documenting discrimination by federal grant programs against faith-based groups. Subsequently, President Bush issued executive orders to ensure equal treatment of all grant applicants, regardless of their religious nature. Three additional executive orders (13198, 13280 and 13342) established eleven offices in the White House and 10 executive branch agencies in order to realize the intent of the equal treatment orders. Their work has focused on the cooperation of the federal bureaucracy, the grant programs themselves, and on communicating these efforts to service organizations throughout the country.

H.R. 1054 seeks to make permanent the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiative and its 10 agency offices. Such a proposal, however, compels us to investigate the experience of previous White House Administrations and, more simply, what other entities currently exist with similar missions. Moreover, the Subcommittee will examine the successes and shortcomings of the President's Faith-Based and Community Initiative to understand what these experiences may tell us about how far we have come and where we need to go.

The efforts of past Presidents, in fact, clearly illustrate how the Bush Administration's efforts represent a commonsense addition to at least a decade and a half of Presidential vision and leadership. In 1989, President George H.W. Bush created the White House "points of light" office. After four years of national leadership in support of grassroots service organizations, President Bush passed a four-pillared White House office to President Bill Clinton. From 1993 to 2001, Clinton consolidated this office and eventually added the AmeriCorps, which sent forth volunteer citizens to the grassroots service organizations his predecessor had sought to bolster. At the beginning of President George W. Bush's Administration, establishing a new White House Office appears like a reasonable next step.

The White House Faith-Based and Community Initiative effort adds to previous efforts by trying to instill fairness in the government grant system and ensure the rights of religious services groups. While this is a logical and necessary step, it has not been entirely successful. For instance, in the areas of food stamp issuance and providing drug treatment, groups intended to be treated equally have, ironically, been punished. Most troubling perhaps, is that many potential programmatic successes have been blunted because of little or no cooperation with state and local governments.

As the Subcommittee considers the merits of H.R. 1054, Members may consider additional changes to the law so that Americans in their time of need receive the greatest possible impact from the compassion of their neighbors. Already existing White House offices, the Faith-Based and Community Initiative, and state and local efforts are uncoordinated, creating confusion and frustration amongst America's grassroots services groups. Creating a comprehensive compassion strategy through executive branch re-organization may be necessary for the long-term accomplishment of reaching our fellow Americans in their time of need.